
TAKING AND SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP

Group Leadership

Some people have learned that individual leadership is oppressive and undemocratic and that, if a group leads, better leadership will result. Without individual responsibility and accountability, however, often nothing gets done. Though teamwork and consensus-building are essential parts of group process, individual leadership is also essential. In order to accomplish our goals as a group, we need to take the initiative as individuals to move projects forward. As individuals, we need to assume that we can take charge and ask others to work with us.

The following questions can help us get started:

1. If I knew this project was completely up to me, what would I do now?
2. If I knew I was completely powerful, how would I act in this situation?
3. If I knew everyone around me was eager and waiting for my input, how would I act?
4. If I truly believed my contributions could make a profound difference, what skills, knowledge, or insights would I offer?

Often, we do not take on leadership responsibilities because we do not recognize our own power and abilities. Our experience of sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, and other oppressions may have convinced us that others can lead better. We need to develop the courage to step through this internalized oppression and recognize that everyone is a potential leader. We must help each other to develop these abilities.

Society has conditioned us to think of a leader as a martyr, someone who takes care of others, a server of other people's needs at the expense of his or her own. Many people confuse the role of a parent, particularly of a mother, with the role of a leader. Or they think of the dogmatic leader, who leads against other people instead of with them.

In reality, a leader's primary responsibility is to think of the group as a whole, not just of her or his individual role. To think well about the group is to think of the group as it is now, its origins and past history, its goals, and its future. A skillful leader listens well to all members of the group, then makes a principled decision to move the group forward, thinking of the group as a whole.

Leadership Oppression

Leaders are often placed on pedestals; then, when they fail to meet expectations, they are trashed. Leadership oppression is when we judge, criticize, blame, gossip, ridicule, name-call, threaten, etc. anyone who is in a leadership position. Some people have learned that liberalism means you can share your negativity. Instead, leaders need to be given opportunities to make mistakes and correct them with the support of the group.

Our propensity to be pulled into the role of attacking leaders is predicated on unhealed experiences of oppression:

- **oppression as young people:** as young people, we may have been threatened, teased, criticized, not listened to etc. As children, we may have been hurt by adults. These earlier hurtful experiences become the foundation for attacking or colluding in an attack on someone else. We may have been frightened as a young person and, therefore, don't know what to do to stop or respond to the attack. Feelings of powerlessness are the key ingredient in leadership oppression.
- **oppression as a result of classism, racism, ant-Semitism, sexism, agism etc.:** for example, working class people often get told they're not articulate enough, people of color are told they're not smart enough, Jews are told they're controlling, women are told they're too emotional, young people are told they don't have enough qualifications, etc.

Leaders need to be thought well of, cared about, and backed. We don't have to assume that people need to be perfect to lead; when a mistake is made, the leader need not be attacked. Leadership oppression often means that people can be afraid to take on the role of leader.

When you are pulled into attacking a leader, it is very important to determine if your response to the leader's actions is based on your feelings, perhaps of disappointment or discouragement, or due to a mistake the leader can correct. When leaders make mistakes, it is important to move closer, stay connected, and offer support – in other words, to be an ally. Through close relationships, a change in attitudes or behavior can occur.

All of us are responsible for interrupting leadership attacks, including gossip, and not to collude. We need to face our fears as to what prevents us from intervening in the attack. Listening to the hurt behind the attack must be offered only on the condition of first ceasing the attack and clearing up our role in it.